

*The Artistry of Freefall*

Paula Meehan, *Dharmakaya*. Carcanet, £6.95stg

Paula Meehan's fifth collection is subtitled "truth body". The volume's major achievement is a re-definition of "truth" as the delicate act of balancing reality with releasing fantasy so that one does not cancel the other out. In Meehan's earlier work, competition between these two—and consequently more directive statement in a dominating allegorical mode—predominated. But the development is also continuous with her previous volumes: Meehan addresses this new balance through multiple meditations on how complex social reality is inscribed on the suffering human body, an important approach in her work for many years. In so doing, the collection sounds again the keynote of Irish women's poetry in this generation: "...I tell myself,/ you are suffering/ animal... , not nymph// nor sylph, nor figment" ("It Is All I Ever Wanted"). But the dominant note here is no longer the urgency of direct, outward-focused, concurrently fearful and triumphant invocation, as found in the volume which preceded this one, *Pillow Talk*. There, prayer-poems functioned as talismans to ensure "a protective zone to ward off evil" ("The Wounded Child"). Here, there is far less focus on identifiable public locations of Dublin; indeed, geographical unreality, such as "the long and lonely coast of Leitrim", announces a translation into the co-ordinates of emotional rather than empirical reality. *Dharmakaya* shifts towards a more personally-oriented meditative tenderness in its portraits of the men and women of Meehan's larger family—"creature!" she cries out to one of them. Among these poems is one focusing on her father's torn and raw hands in a magically iced-up city of her childhood, or "The View from Under the Table" in which the child's unnameable terror of an incomprehensible world is made expressible in her vividly mimetic projection of the spectres which haunt her: "In the fridge, white/ ghosts./ Black ghosts in the coal shed. In the bread bin, hungry ghosts." The poems focus on themselves as theatre and this is essential to their effect. Together they mark a new stage of maturity in Meehan's work as they produce *and* reflect upon their re-constructions of the speaker's vulnerable psychic life, particularly as a child.

The poems in their many acts of "back construction" occupy si-

multaneously the spheres of reliable and unreliable memory. The result is that the zones of realism and fantasy are rendered co-terminous—no longer in *Pillow Talk*'s sense of surreal kaleidoscope, but as a mutually adjusting continuum. Further results follow. Meehan has always reached out to a particular, often inter-generational audience, but the collaborative nature of her dramatisations of the inner life here—especially her focus on sisters—signals a new sense of community and security; in the quest-poem by which she is known, she is no longer so much the isolated pioneer; other artist figures of her own generation can speak for her. So when her younger sister steps out across the garden fence as a circus acrobat in “Take a breath. Hold it. Let it go”, the girl is enacting symbolically the act of stepping into the unknown that the older speaker is about to take in leaving home. In doing so, she helps the speaker realise a key finding of this volume: that she can “find[] her centre” only *through* the risk of freefall, not, as her previous work suggested, despite that risk. Hence, the imperative to be “made whole” again, which informs *Pillow Talk*, no longer applies here in such a direct way; weakness and fragility are no longer defined as oppositional to strength. In “Zugswang” from the 1991 collection, *The Man Who Was Marked by Winter*, the speaker anticipates that the unnamed female subject of her poem “Any day now [...] will let go her grip,/ surrender herself to the ecstatic freefall./ We are all aware that when she hits bottom/ she will shatter into smithereens”. However, this conclusiveness is refuted in *Dharmakaya*. Again and again in this latest volume, control is taken and released only to be found anew. Her young sister “falls anyway”; the artist is powerless to change the past—but she can change the shape that the facts of experience make in her head—the “virtual childhoods” which disable us (“The Trapped Woman of the Internet”) are more clearly than ever identified as Meehan’s primary concern—even to the point of excusing external threat, as in “Fist”. This poem is arguably problematic in its suggestion that the violent actions of others in the outer world can be addressed only by the victim re-opening relations with her early self. Yet this is of a piece with the findings of mystics of old and of psychologists in recent years.

*Dharmakaya* tends to negotiate the territory between, rather than opt for one or other, of the two possibilities of a changeable and a changeless given reality. Hence the poems formally flourish their occupation of in-between zones, for example, by direct counter-assertion (“under the table no one could see you. My granny could see me.”), and by the skilful placing of word, line and stanza-breaks so that meanings similarly are set up only to be undone. Complex reflections upon her own work as poet result from these concerns and strategies. For example, the justified anger of a poem with a specific political target, “The Exact Moment I Became a Poet”—in which the in-

vidious partnership between language and institutionalised power abuse is precisely diagnosed—is qualified by the poet-speaker’s knowledge that this moment of realisation was also the moment of her vocation as artist. The juxtaposition of art and injustice is an uneasy one. Not only the teacher in the poem but this poem itself is divided between the task of describing and the temptation of prescribing. The ending is mawkish: “Words could pluck you,/ leave you naked,/ your lovely shiny feathers all gone”—the central image of the poem is extended that bit too far. This illustrates the difficulty of negotiating the transition between the registers of adult and child, analysis and re-enactment, folk romance and personal memory, with which this poem and volume is concerned.

Yet the collection’s direct engagement with the challenge of just these transitions, is central to its achieved impact. In *Dharmakaya*, as in Meehan’s earlier work, there is a re-claiming of cliché, for example, in the recurring trope of golden hair, and a particularly notable investment in the effects of oral incantation, using the resources of strong, roughly-patterned rhythmic vowel patterns, alliteration, and in the latter part of the volume, a variety of regular rhyme and metre patterns including those of popular verse traditions. But rather than functioning as warrior’s weapons to control and vanquish threat to the psyche as in her earlier work, these effects (along with the volume’s skilled merging of the opposing time frames of then and now to create an “other” time zone—that of the poem itself) create the collection’s governing thematic focus on the necessity of deliberate artistry at the moment of freefall into epiphany. This freefall is newly realised as indispensable. That moment is, to my ears, least well realised in the sequences “The Lost Children of the Inner City” and “Suburb”, but is powerfully achieved in the title poem which celebrates as a single creative continuum the life-work and death of the Dublin street artist who was known as the Diceman: “When you step out into death/ with a deep breath,/ the last you’ll ever take/ in this shape,// remember the first step on the street—/ the footfall and the shadow/ of its fall—into silence.”

The figure of the Diceman sets the keynote for a collection that re-defines creativity as something which is realised, not in definable result, but in process. Hence, closed doors, blank sheets, the unchangeable inaccessible past, self-admitted fantasy, even silence, are translated into openness and new possibility. (The urgency of this translation is signalled in the number of poems which skip the “frontdoor” of a first line in order to “plant words on these blank fields”). The risk such translation involves, is also recognised by Meehan—that the magic of art (art’s “beautiful myth of sorting” as “Ectopic” describes it), does not so much confront as accommodate the violence and suffering with which it is concerned—the partnership of art and violence in a number

of poems here is striking. The poet like her sister on the garden fence, walks a narrow line between these two options, but the power of the poems is in their openness to the risk involved. In her encounter with a vixen in “It Is All I Ever Wanted”, the deliberateness with which the poet appropriates the animal as symbol is itself answered in the vixen’s message:

She was saying—  
or I needed her to say—*out of the spurious*

*the real, be sure  
to know the value of the song  
as well as the song’s true nature.*

Be sure, my granny used to say,  
of what you’re wanting,  
for fear you’d get it entirely.

A distinctive new note in this collection, and one that results from the poet’s openness to risk as described above, is its playfulness. This is seen particularly in the love poems. The wonderful “The Bog of Moods”, revels in the riotous impact of arbitrary interpretative categories created by the kind of language slippage that is so often rendered suspect even as it is invoked in the work of Muldoon, Carson and Heaney:

Glory be to whimsy  
and misreading that have us cross the Bog  
of Moots or Moos. For yes, they’re there—  
the slow moan of them squelching through the fog  
of their own breaths, swinging full udders...

Meehan withholds judgement even while recognising the danger of an art based on the principle that, as she says in this poem, “The harder you look, the more you will have seen”. Such excess, once made conscious, is revalued by her as a tool of resistance. In “The Tantric Master”, the speaker disempowers her lover’s phallus as transcendental signifier, paradoxically *by* consciously paying this “noble and magic wand” obeisance in a poem of playful yet genuine praise of the male body. The poem gleefully mixes up gender registers: “For I shall consider the mesmeric draw of his nipples,/ like standing stones on the broad plain of his chest”.

A hard-headed yet celebratory engagement with the literary tradition as it has been handed down, is one of the joys of this collection. In the sequence, “On Poetry”, Meehan brushes against the grain of

conservative deployments of the composite “three faces of Eve” figure—the virgin, the mother and the whore—which here can represent female muse and woman poet alike. In the context of the current climate in Irish literary culture, where women’s right of access to the poetry tradition has no sooner been secured than it is being undermined by denials of there ever having been real difficulty involved, Meehan uses these figures to identify and challenge the typecasting of woman’s composite function as eternal postulant to the tradition, silent protector of it and derivative parasite upon it. In her poem the three female figures form a continuum approximating Kristeva’s three stages of feminism: the virgin who is grateful for her initiation; the mother who, in her refusal to nurture, may reproduce the restrictions of a male-centred tradition even as she protests fiercely against them; and the whore under whose signature, perhaps, *Dharmakaya* finds its truest home. The whore is a muse-poet figure who openly recognises the purposeful commodification of meaning in the formal effects of poetry (including the use of gendered imagery), rather than disguising this process “the way the goodwives/girlfriends did”. Under the sign of this honesty, a union between realism and vision, between male and female poetry traditions, is achievable—not despite but because of the odds against it which this poem and volume so clearly explore:

I must allow

there’ll be no chance of kindling from my trance  
 the spark that wakes the body into dance;  
 yet still comes unbidden like god’s gift: an image—  
 a boy turns beneath me, consolatory and strange.